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ABSTRACT

Neighborhood-based independent schools are more satisfactory than idealistic attempts to achieve an equitable education for minority and disadvantaged children within public institutions. Instead of assimilation, there is acute alienation from schooling for a large proportion of minority students in poor urban neighborhoods as majority-culture communities relocate themselves, taking with them their considerable educational resources. Independent schools operated by and for minorities allow parents to exercise greater control over the educational fate of their children. These schools serve mainly as "feeder" schools for public and traditional private schools and should be supported because of their expertise in creating achieving environments for the education of minorities. (RDN)

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One System Is Not Enough: A Free-Market Alternative for The Education of Minorities

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by *Joan Davis Ratteray*

The education of America's minorities, its poor, and its disadvan-
tagged has been shaped in recent decades by forces of Romantic
optimism. But some minorities have steadfastly refused to accept this
vision of what should be theirs. Faced with monolithic government-
sponsored programs, they have developed other options in education.
Their laudable efforts now deserve broader support, as America con-
tinues to revitalize itself by infusions of immigrating ethnic minorities
that face startlingly similar problems.

Once Upon A Time

It was idealistically assumed that because mass education had
worked rather well after World War II, it would continue to work.
America's disenfranchised ethnic groups were expected to derive the
same benefits as had their European counterparts in the past.

It was also assumed for several generations that compensatory edu-
cation programs would prepare minority cultural groups for assimi-

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tion. They were to be "melted" by public schools into a culturally neutral mass that some perceived as the only true path to becoming a "a good American."

Moreover, it was assumed that once these children were introduced to the public education system, they would be able to make significant academic and social advances, year after year.

Finally, it was assumed that the problems with minorities would be solved if large quantities of educational resources were allocated, then marshaled under the systemic umbrellas of public schools that took advantage of economies of scale. Billions of dollars were spent on these programs.

Many of the programs that were devised to respond to the perceived needs of these children have achieved only some of their short-term objectives and have produced few measurable long-term gains.

Instead of assimilation, there is acute alienation from the process of schooling for a large proportion of minority students, especially from poor neighborhoods in urban areas, where there are many Blacks and Hispanics. The cause has been attributed primarily to ineffective schooling for both the children and for the parents, who are therefore unable to provide the necessary extracurricular academic support found in other communities.

Although Asian-Americans have not experienced high dropout rates, they are beginning to have an experience with which Blacks and Hispanics are familiar. Majority-culture communities are physically relocating themselves and their educational resources outside communities with significant numbers of Asian-American immigrants, leaving them captives of a diminished public system.

The downward slide of schools in general also has been well documented, but it has had a greater impact on minorities because a larger proportion of them are influenced by poor schools. Not only are they more severely damaged, but the popular clarion call for excellence in education does not specifically address this setback. Again there is a demand for top-down action, when the impetus must be a groundswell from the bottom up. And this is no less true of minorities, who must find within themselves the resources they need.

A model for action already exists. For more than 180 years, minorities across America have sought options for education in addition to public schools. Valiantly, parents continue to exercise greater control over the educational fate of their children by placing them in non-public institutions. By their successes, using far fewer resources, they have earned the right to be considered as valuable and equal partners in the process of schooling. They now seek to influence government policies to incorporate greater freedom of choice in the existing educational system.

Enriching The System

A recent study sponsored by the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise has identified over 300 independent schools operated by and for minorities. Many more are believed to exist. A preliminary report indicates that these institutions seem to be making great strides in providing quality education for African-American, Hispanic, American-Indian and Asian-American children, generally in urban areas.¹

These are not elite schools, limited to children of the affluent or to disadvantaged children on scholarships. These elementary and middle schools are struggling institutions that serve as "feeder" schools to public and traditional private schools. They survive on little more than tuition, and their fundraising campaigns, for the most part, are gnomes compared to the large endowments of others. Site visits to nearly 40 of them indicated that their strengths lie in the determination of the parents, the academic success and social development of the children, and the commitment of teachers and administrators.

For a long time, parents have complained about the treatment they have received in many large urban public systems. Often there were subtle and blatant examples of racial discrimination. They have been held at arm's length and ignored by teachers. Frequently they have been manipulated in PTA meetings by the off-the-record decision-making between administrators and teachers. Many times they were disillusioned by the apparent passivity and apathy among some of their fellow parents. In an attempt to develop their range of options for the education of their children, they have created or found schools that are able to respond to their needs in a timely manner.

Independent schools in the NCNE study are, in many ways, symbols of triumphant parenthood. Sometimes parents were the founding teachers. As a rule, however, their regular programmatic and fundraising participation are both needed and welcomed. They also have been willing to assume the responsibility for defining how the needs of their children will be met. And at great personal sacrifice, they often have taken tuition from welfare checks from members of their extended families or by working multiple jobs.

A distinguishing feature of these schools is their use of cultural, and sometimes religious, backgrounds as a context for academic achievement. Doctrinally-focused Baptists, Catholics, and Muslims share a common bond with more secular Pan African ideologues and other preparatory schools. They find that it gives meaning and purpose to the pursuit of knowledge. Motifs from their various languages, cultures and religions are woven deeply into the fabric of the curriculum. They are able to demonstrate that children who look within themselves

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for their strengths can become more productive citizens in a culturally pluralistic society.

Most of the schools, nevertheless, go beyond teaching the basics. They also do more than academically rehabilitate some urban youngsters who may be declared unteachable or ignored by the large public system. Computer literacy programs are increasingly becoming a part of their curricula, while science and high-level mathematics are taught at an early age.

One school in Denver stresses the vested interest its students have in at least five Indian cultures from Mexico and the Southwestern U.S. But language instruction is not always limited to a child's indigenous tongue. Blacks study Chinese in Boston, Arabic in Manhattan, and Swahili in Chicago, while Asians study Spanish in Los Angeles.

Many of the graduates have attended the same school from preschool through eighth grade because parents have urged administrators to add a grade each year as the children grew older. But most of these students go on to traditional private schools or to selective public schools, as these independent institutions rapidly become successful feeder schools that complement and enrich the public-school experience.

Almost all the schools have long waiting lists, and the administrators are dismayed each year when they have to turn away so many children. This kind of demand illustrates how alternatives to public schools are supported by minority parents.

The trend toward independent schools of all types has grown steadily in recent years. We may even go so far as to say that it escalated with the commitment to action that characterized the Sixties and the early Seventies. Some of the neighborhood-based independent schools in the NCNE study, however, started in the early 1900s and 1930s.

Many schools for African-Americans can draw inspiration from Prince Hall, a former slave who in 1800 started an independent school in Boston.¹ Prince Hall later founded an organization of freemasons that today bears his name. Another masonic group, the Oddfellows, reported in their literature in 1898 that Blacks had acquired at least 18 colleges, 34 academies and 51 high schools.² These independent schools are not to be confused with separate public schools,³ which has been a different phenomenon in the history of education for minorities. It is the legacy of independent schools that stands today as a rich national resource.

Worthy of Support

Independent neighborhood-based schools have shown themselves to be worthy of support, not only because of their achievements but

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because of the constructive role they can have in implementing federal, state and local plans for educating minority and poor children.

To the public sector, they can serve as models of accountability. They can show parents how to have a greater impact and increase their effectiveness, especially in urban public systems where they have had an inherently and traditionally weak position.

They also have specific expertise in creating achieving environments for the education of minorities. A recent government study reveals that even though school-age population is declining, there will be a larger proportion of minorities and immigrants in inner cities.⁴ There is no doubt that these groups will demand changes in curricula and basic skills development. Therefore, the expertise of academically-successful culture-based independent schools will be valuable to government policymakers at all levels.

In addition to serving as models to the public sector, these schools have a regenerative capability in the private sector. They have demonstrated in the past a willingness to share their expertise and leadership with others who have started similar schools. For only a fraction of the per-pupil resources poured into public systems, independent schools can achieve maximum return on invested dollars by either replicating themselves or adapting their model in indigenous communities all across America.

Their model-building potential is evidence of their maturity, a quality found among the students, the parents, the administrators, and the teachers. They all have come to recognize that their schools are no longer an end in themselves but the beginning of a process that challenges the contemporary philosophies in educating minorities yet sustains academic achievement and social progress in the students.

Almost universally, these schools are looking for financial support for immediate projects such as enhanced physical plants, equipment and supplies, and longitudinal studies of graduates. They are generally cautious about interference in their curricula, but they are willing to consider reasonable suggestions that are consistent with their independence. Most importantly, they seek to take steps that will ensure their longevity and their future ability to help these types of students.

If they are supported and encouraged, they are prepared to demonstrate the bases for their success. However, they are in the business of survival, human growth, and structure building and seek only those partnerships that will further those objectives.

Another major obstacle in the delivery of support to these institutions binds the hands of the givers more than it does the receivers. There is persistent failure in our society to let minorities, the poor, and the disadvantaged speak for themselves.⁵ We often dictate to them

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what we, as professionals, feel is best for them. We tend not to inquire with sincerity about solutions they have developed to their own problems. In our blind arrogance, we superimpose on them our collective "expertise."

Many government and corporate funding sources favor proposals by those who are experientially several steps removed from the problems being studied. They look askance at those who offer more than speculation about optimum solutions for someone else. They frequently find it incomprehensible that successful programs can be developed by grassroots practitioners themselves.

One of the arguments heard most frequently is that this approach involves too much "risk." Yet, risk-taking always has been the foundation of our entrepreneurial society, even in education. And seldom have the odds been so favorable, because these schools have proven themselves with the high caliber of children they deliver to traditional public and private institutions.

By imposing our judgments and withholding support, we drop a veil that defines the limits of their creative participation. Those we seek to "help" develop the feeling that they have nothing worthwhile to offer and that self-help is counterproductive. The schools in the NCNE study have pierced a hole in this veil.

As we redirect supportive and investigative resources, it is important that we reexamine our criteria for acceptance of proposals that involve these alternative institutions. It is time to recognize that neighborhood-based independent schools are eligible to become equal partners in the development of an improved educational system for all Americans.

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